IS MARRIAGE

They've taken their bows at the very top of the ladder and then taken their vows. After that it was one straight plunge down into nothingness. Why are most Bollywood actresses marriage cursed?

It's like some medieval curse on the fair ladies of tinsel town. *"Stay single and your pockets will jingle, get double and you're headed for trouble."* The actress has her back to the wall from the time she enters the industry lots of competition and very few good roles. By sheer grit and luck she gets ahead of the pack and stays ahead. So much success, so much adulation, but the very *Bharatiya nari* roles she has enacted make her look around for her own happily-ever-after ending and she decides to take the plunge. Everyone cheers, everyone sighs, what a beautiful bride, what a lucky bridegroom... then they go home and the beautiful bride is forgotten. Roles? Ah yes, we're looking for the perfect role for you... The perfect role never comes... but the babies do and after the first pics of the brand new glamour mom, that too fades away and she's dead to the film world and worse, her fans. The lucky bridegroom finds he has a wife now, not the celluloid star that dazzled him so... and they become just another couple with a mountain of adjustments.

Take most actresses who married – we'll start with Mumtaz. Mumtaz was at the peak of her career when she married Mayur. He was just 22, she told us, a student with a weekly allowance. "His father had a lot of money but what difference did it make then? I took a risk by marrying him. For all you know, today he could have been on the streets after having frittered away all his father's money."

She did take a risk. Mumtaz was the kind of woman who merely had to say the word and any man she wanted would come running. She had the charisma which made each man in the room feel he was special to her. When it looked like her star had peaked, she surprised everyone and climbed even higher. And yet she snapped her fingers and kissed it all good-bye. She wanted her fairy tale marriage with the Kenyan industrialist Mayur Madhvani. And she smiled that insouciant smile and never looked back at the trail of broken hearts she left behind.

And then it was her turn to feel the pain of a broken heart. Her husband betrayed her love and trust, and has been involved with another woman for more years than Mumtaz can remember. She could have left him, but it says much for the woman that she found the strength to stay. The same grit that got her to the top of Bollywood kept her fighting for her marriage and her daughters. She refused to become an object of pity and no one could point fingers at her.

With pain came wisdom and she told us that she resigned herself to the fact that the other woman fulfilled a real need in her husband, which she, Mumtaz, could not fill. "There must be something in her which is lacking in me, while I must be having something that she doesn't. That is why he is with both of us." Before Mayur can count his lucky stars she adds, "but he has to decide whom he wants to spend the rest of his life with."

The saddest thing to hear was, "When he married me, I thought he loved me. Nobody can say which marriage will work and which will not. All I can say is that Mayur could not have been attracted to me because of my image since he never watched Hindi films. I think he liked me as a person."

Then there was Zeenat Aman. Marital bliss eluded her. There was her marriage to the already married Sanjay Khan who humiliated her in front of his family and friends by hitting her in public, in the middle of a party. Her beautiful face was disfigured for a while, but Zeenat bounced back to get into another bad marriage, this time to Mazhar Khan. Here too there was violence. She had two sons through him and as the relationship soured the fights became worse. Finally she had to take one son away while the other stayed with Mazhar. She even had to get her own son arrested when he came to hit her. Things steadied after Mazhar's death and life has become normal with both her sons living with her.

Rekha was married to Vinod Mehra for a brief while. Her personal life was grist for the mill with her current love

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interest hitting the headlines. At the same time she worked on her acting and developed a formidable talent. Then she married the industrialist Mukesh Agarwal. That marriage came to a tragic end with the man taking his own life and Rekha came back like a tired child to the arms of her mother, the world of cinema, where she reclaimed her place again as one of the big guns among the actresses of Bollywood.

Dimple's was a fairy tale wedding. Practically a child-bride and the darling of the masses after her runaway hit *Bobby*, Dimple married Rajesh Khanna the superstar when she was just 16. She became a mother soon after and a little later, she was the mother of two children. Too young to fathom the rashness of throwing away a wonderful career she willingly settled down to marriage with the prince of her dreams. But things started going downhill. The ageing actor and the child-bride were not compatible. Rajesh Khanna was linked with other women older than Dimple and closer his own age. Struggling to put on a brave face Dimple wilted under the responsibilities of being a dutiful wife and mother. I still remember her sitting desultorily over a giant jigsaw puzzle in their house Aashirwad, groping for words to tell us how kind Kaka was to her. She had no one to talk to and nowhere to go. Devyani Chaubal, that generally harsh critic, smiled wryly and said: 'Instead of being married at 16 this beautiful girl should be smiling at a fat moon in her window and dreaming of a mythical lover.' Dimple was supremely unhappy at Aashirwad. Finally, she moved out with her children and lived separately. She also came back to films.

Remember Mandakini? She was riding high with the success of her first-*Ram Teri Ganga Maili*. Her career was chugging along nicely on all cylinders when she decided to call a halt. The nesting instinct happened and she quit it all to get married and move to a neighbouring country. After awhile the curse touched her too and her marriage failed. She returned to India with a small child to look after and quite, quite broke. Now she has been struggling to make ends meet.

Then there was Meenakshi Sheshadri who married Harish Mysore and went off to the US to stay with him. But life in the US is just not suitable to a star accustomed to being waited upon hand and foot. The reality of a domesticated existence bit and bit hard. A few years later, Meenakshi was back in India with her daughter. She held a few dance concerts and is currently looking for work. She insists everything is okay with her marriage but those who know give knowing sidelong looks and ask why is she spending all of her time in India and not with her pati parmeshwar in the US?

Poonam Dhillon was one of the most sought after actresses when she married Ashok Thakeria at the peak of her career. She quit her career for her director husband. But two kids later, they divorced and now she's involved with an industrialist. That is a messy situation because the industrialist is a married man and his wife is dead sure Poonam's after her husband for his money.

Reena Roy fell in love and got married to the Pakistani cricketer Mohsin Khan. They were happy for a while and she even had a daughter Jannat. But things started souring and Mohsin wanted to go

back to his mother country. They got a divorce and he even went back to Pakistan. But then he wanted their daughter to live with him and Reena wouldn't let her daughter go. The court had ordered Mohsin to leave the child with Reena, so Mohsin kidnapped the child and fled to Pakistan without Reena's knowledge. For years, Reena pined for her child. Finally just recently she got Jannat back when Mohsin just put the child on a plane and sent her back to India.

Most recent messed up marriage was that of Neelam's. Hers was a runaway wedding in proper filmi ishtyle. His parents were against the marriage and threatened Neelam's husband, their son Rishi Sethia with dire consequences namely, writing him off the will. Rishi was so besotted with Neelam that he bought a flat for her and lived separately with her. He was truly besotted and it bordered on the paranoid. He wouldn't allow her to wear western clothes and he'd expect her to be wrapped from head to toe. They would go to discotheques and she was expected to wear a saree with a full sleeved blouse! He would attend family functions but she was not allowed to participate because his parents didn't want her to. He would get violent if she so much as tried expressing her views. He expected her to stay at home all day, looking after the house. He was one possessive, conservative husband. Thing got too much to handle and Neelam walked away quietly, leaving a goodbye note behind. Only a few months after her marriage, Neelam was back in India ready to take up the threads of her career and work on them again.

And finally all eyes are on the Nenes. The student doctor slogs like a dog and his wife Madhuri was also slogging at keeping house efficiently when she had a host of servants back home waiting for her every wish which was their command. Slumming it was a peculiar interlude but then loneliness and a sense of what-in-hell-am-I-doing-here took over. Nene suggested that she finish her pending films while he finished his studying.

Madhuri came back to the milieu she is most comfortable with, she continued her interrupted films and then, surprise, surprise, she began signing on new films! Aside from *Devdas* and *Hum Aapke Hain Sanam*, she has Yash Chopra's new film with Amitabh Bachchan, Mahesh Manjrekar's English version of *Astitva*, a South production with Malayalam superstar Mohanlal and of course, Sony's reality TV show, 'Shubh Vivaah'. It looks like Mrs. Nene is happy to spend a long, long time in Bollywood.

Those close to the couple say there are considerable teething troubles in this marriage and while Madhuri is in India her husband is reveling in his bachelor freedom attending games, ogling women and generally having a ball. Her mother gets all hot under the collar when asked about fissures in her daughter's marriage. "She's happy, I'm happy, we're all happy!" We hope so too, but this long distance marriage has even more potential for trouble than all the other marriages mentioned before: the long distance, the long separation and something we can never forget – The Curse on all married actresses.

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